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Caritas: 1,000 dead, missing in Ivory Coast town

by Carol Glatz by Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY -- One thousand people were suspected to be dead or missing in the town of Duekoue, Ivory Coast, after clashes throughout the country intensified, Caritas Internationalis reported.

Aid organizations have been recovering hundreds of bodies in Duekoue, according to news reports.

Caritas workers visiting the town "are reporting a thousand people have been killed there or 'disappeared,'" Caritas Internationalis, the Catholic Church's aid and development agency, said in an April 2 statement.

"Caritas condemns all attacks on civilians and says the humanitarian situation in Ivory Coast is rapidly deteriorating," it said.

Army forces and militia supporting President-elect Alassane Ouattara have been clashing with security personnel and others loyal to outgoing President Laurent Gbagbo, who refused to leave office after Ouattara was declared the winner of elections Nov. 28.

Some 1 million people have fled the violence, according to the United Nations. Many have escaped the violence by taking refuge in Liberia.

Caritas Internationalis called for an investigation into the deaths to find out who is responsible. The massacre took place in a part of Duekoue controlled by pro-Ouattara forces during intense clashes March 27-29, it said.

Bishop Gaspard Beby Gneba of Man, whose diocese includes Duekoue, told the Vatican's missionary news agency Fides April 2 that civilian and church-owned facilities in his diocese such as churches, schools and health clinics have been destroyed and looted.

Bishop Gneba said 20,000 people had taken refuge at the Catholic mission in Duekoue, and another 2,000 refugees were in the two parishes of Guiglo. Among them were many Liberians who had been in Ivory Coast since the end of civil war in Liberia in 2003.

Archbishop Jean-Pierre Kutwa of Abidjan told Fides April 4 that the situation there was quiet yet extremely tense -- like the calm before a storm.

He said people have locked themselves in their homes, and many were without water, electricity and food.

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"We are awaiting the finale to the battle. It's an indescribable tragedy," the archbishop said.

Meanwhile, the diocesan director of Caritas in Abidjan, Father Richard Kissi, was released March 31 after he and another priest were kidnapped by an armed group March 29.

Father Kissi was in good condition and had not been mistreated by his captors, according to Fides.

The director of development and human promotion at Caritas Ivory Coast in Abidjan, Jean Djoman, told Fides April 1 that the humanitarian situation was dramatic, with 30,000 displaced people in different areas in Abidjan.

He said the humanitarian situation in the west of the country, which is in the hands of pro-Ouattara forces, was "extremely grave."

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